

Chapter Two: Christian Media

by Julia Lesage

Conservative religious institutions in the United States use all the modes of media technology to communicate their messages to a broad spectrum of viewers, listeners, and readers. Ironically, for many years mainstream U.S. culture has judged Christian fundamentalism primarily in terms of its resistance to modernism; for example, although the “creationist” position won the Scopes trial in 1925, the U.S. press and many intellectuals have long excoriated fundamentalism for its backwardness and anti-intellectualism. However, although the religious right still deals with a very narrow range of issues ideologically, in the last several decades it has built up an extensive think-tank apparatus to shape public policy and has multiplied the ways by which it gets a conservative political message to a large public. From the optic of looking at the religious right through its media productions, we can evaluate the resources the right has to muster and the social structures within which those resources are utilized.

In his essay here, “Who’s Mediating the Storm? Right-wing Alternative Information Networks,” Chip Berlet describes the range of media used by three sectors of the political right: secular conservatives, the far right, and the theocratic right, which includes groups like the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, and Concerned Women of America (these groups’ functioning is covered in explored elsewhere in this anthology). Berlet notes the many ways that right-wing institutions have built up a complex and diverse infrastructure for disseminating their perspectives outside the mainstream media, which they see as hostile to the religious right:

The increased use of electronic alternative media in the 1980’s and 1990’s involved online computer systems, networks and services; fax networks and

trees; shortwave radio programs; networks of small AM radio stations, with syndicated programs distributed by satellite transmissions or even by mailed audiotapes; home satellite dish reception, providing both TV audio/video programs and separate audio programs; local cable television channels, through which nationally-produced videos can sometimes get aired; and mail-order video and audiotape distributorships.

What is particularly striking about all these conservative Christian uses of the media is how each media outlet refers to publications or desirable follow-ups for the reader/viewer/listener/computer user to pursue in some other information medium. That is, each Christian right organization or radio/television program expects to tie its audience into other outlets of information or into other uses of the media to affect public policy. In addition, a number of conservative media producers have proven to be masters of their form, most notably Rush Limbaugh in the secular sphere—as detailed by Jeff Land here “Sitting in Limbaugh” in this book—and Pat Robertson in the secular sphere, with the television program, *The 700 Club*.

In the course of this essay, I will refer several times to an extended example from *The 700 Club*, first to demonstrate how the most prominent Christian television show in the United States involves its audiences in using other media forms, and later to demonstrate its emotional mastery of the medium of television. I shall also trace how other institutions on the Christian right use a variety of media outlets for their message diffusion—from think tanks to independent production companies to political action groups. Contemporary Christian media has its historical origins in entrepreneurial “parachurch” evangelism deriving from revivalism in the United States and the concomitant enterprises built up around it, particularly radio shows. Now televangelism is epitomized by the vast publishing enterprise of a figure like Dr. James Dobson, whose videotapes and radio programs

are described by several of the authors in this book, including Eithne Johnson, Meryem Ersoz, and Chip Berlet. Although Dobson does not describe himself as a “political” figure, the views propagated through his media outlets coincide with that of the activist Christian right, drawing on a “common sense” view of the world shared by many conservative Christians; in her essay here, “Clarity, Mothers, and the Mass-Mediated Soul,” Linda Kintz draws attention to the foundation of such “common sense” Christian ideology in essentialized gender configurations.¹ These gender assumptions have concrete political consequences, which are the subject of the last section of this essay in which I conclude by drawing some observations about conservative rhetorical strategies, examining as a case study the attack on homosexual rights.

The 700 Club

Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club* is the longest running news talk show on television, and it reaches a million households in the United States and about sixty other countries daily. Robertson consummately tailors his evangelism to television’s pace, segmentation, and flow, and consequently his show has always been the most “televisual” of all the religious broadcasts.²

Each episode of *The 700 Club* proper appears in tandem with a news program that airs before it, *Newswatch*, a format which was previously part of *The 700 Club* proper. *Newswatch* looks indistinguishable from mainstream news, and it features CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) reporters speaking live from all over the

¹See Linda Kintz’s book on this subject. [Kintz]

²See John Caldwell’s *Televisuality* for an explication of contemporary television aesthetics.
[Caldwell]

world. As a television production, *Newswatch* has a visual style as professional looking as that of CNN (Cable News Network); since the two networks' logos are so similar, a viewer may well confuse the Christian show for the Turner news network show if *Newswatch*'s topic does not explicitly deal with religion. However, although a news talk-show format then structures its hosts' activity on *The 700 Club* proper, the latter program emphasizes another regular feature, perhaps more important to the committed regular viewer. That is, viewers are often encouraged to call a twenty-four, phone-in prayer and counseling line, also operated by the Robertson conglomerate. "Talk to us," *The 700 Club* says in an intimate way to home viewers.

Robertson's shows have a fast-paced entertainment value, more so than any other religious or advocacy broadcasting. No segment of *Newswatch* or *The 700 Club* lasts longer than a few minutes, and each half hour block incorporates different genre styles and varied modes of discourse, especially in the talk show part, *The 700 Club* proper. Daily *The 700 Club* usually includes within it interviews with successful business people, middle-brow authors, or entertainers, whose products are also subtly pushed. Mixed with the interviews are lively dramatic reenactments of a saved sinner's life, done in the melodrama genre format, or of someone's being miraculously healed or rescued, often done in the reality-television or *Rescue 911* format. The hosts read letters which contain viewers' requests to be healed of a specific infirmity, and they hold hands on the set and lead a communal call to God for healing. Pat Robertson's own origins in broadcasting were as a charismatic preacher oriented to healing the sick; both physical and spiritual healing remain a constant, popular feature of his day-to-day program structure.

It is particularly informative to examine how *The 700 Club* exploits a variety of mutually reinforcing, socially potent media formats. To elucidate these connections, I shall detail their appearance on one show, that of Friday night, May 3, 1996. On

this show CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) ran self-promotion ads for a number of its other media outlets which it encouraged *The 700 Club*'s audience to engage with.

First of all, over about a week of shows, *The 700 Club* ran an ad for a videotape, *Health Facts You Should Know*, Volume 2. As part of a video series by CBN *Newswatch* presenting investigative health reports, this particular tape deals with supposed links between MSG and Alzheimer's, "safe sex" and teen girls' cervical cancer, vaccines and harm to children. The advertisement's images suggest that the health video contains many scare stories about health; the ad's voice-over narrator says (and these words also appear on the screen) it offers "facts you can trust." To receive it, viewers are asked to send "a single gift of \$20 to help CBN's World Wide Ministry" and told they'll learn then "where to get additional reports to protect your health."

A news story about health follows this advertisement for a health video. The news story deals with people who have had success alleviating arthritis by using nutritional supplements. Featured in the story are Christian businessman, pharmacist Bob Henderson and his veterinarian son, Todd Henderson, whose company manufactures two such supplements—Cosamin for humans and Cosaquine as a veterinarian product for horses. Following that news segment, Pat Robertson tells viewers how to get a free Fact Sheet on "Arthritis Relief: New Hope through Nutrition." In general, viewers can get individual Fact Sheets, subscribe to them, or look at them on *The 700 Club*'s newest outlet, a computer-based World Wide Web site on the Internet (address is <<http://www.cbn.org>>). Since these Fact Sheets are one of the publications *The 700 Club* has offered over many years, they must elicit regular, high-volume viewer response.

Following the string of tie-ins weaving back and forth between news story, hosts' commentary, and advertisement, *The 700 Club*'s World Wide Web site,

available to computer users online, is advertised on the television program's next commercial break. This ad is brief and rapidly edited; it builds on the television program's two main levels of appeal, cognitive and emotional. The voice-over narration emphasizes the Internet site's important role in maintaining a community of viewers/listeners, which Christian broadcasting so carefully fosters: "Now, information you can turn to day or night....Talk to us."

When a computer user then visits *The 700 Club*'s Web site, s/he will notice its simple, cleanly designed visual interface. In terms of content, the site has a number of striking features. First, offering reportage, it provides a transcript of two *Newswatch* stories for each of the past thirty day, approximately sixty days in total. Another long section on the web site is one which has significance only to fundamentalists: it tells all the Biblical verses referred to in the programming, tying the programming into the fundamentalist doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. To give the site a personalized appeal, pictures of the show's hosts and director appear, accompanied by their biographies. Visitors to the site also have access to the highly desirable Fact Sheets, for which they then have to enter personal information such as name, address, phone number. This is the point at which the web site fulfills a key function—building Robertson's lucrative and politically useful mailing list. Indeed, all the offers of free phone calls and literature on the television show serve this function, too, the political implications of which will be discussed later.

If *Newswatch* and the CBN web site highlight their informational value, the television ad for the web site also communicates the emotional message, "Talk to us." *The 700 Club* deftly utilizes many forms of intimate address. For example, it frequently flashes a telephone number on the screen encouraging viewers to call the many counselors who are waiting there to answer calls. In one episode of *The 700 Club*, to garner phone calls, host Ben Kinchlow promotes "a special week of prayer":

We care for you. We've got counselors standing by telephones right now.

We're asking us to let us pray for you ... and you can call in your requests to the telephone number on the screen.

We see numerous counselors talking on the phone while sitting at tables in a large room, which has a visibly prominent "prayer clock" on the far wall. This consists of a large hexagonal clock with the globe as a face and with small boxes for prayer cards mounted all around it; co-host Terry Meeuwsen is seen putting prayer pledge cards in the boxes. Ben and Terry relate the kinds of prayer requests they have received, especially for family and for health. Ben notes that many of these are "just what you call impossible situations....We will be delighted to send you a pamphlet that will help you pray through the impossible." Ben also addresses the faithful who might not be so needy at this moment. He asks them to call, not just to ask for prayers but to pledge fifteen minutes a day when they will pray for the burdens borne by America and the world.

In 1986, when Pat Robertson first considered running for President, he said he would not run unless three million people wrote, asked him to run, and pledged financial support. Much of the history of the contemporary Christian right is the history of mailing lists and direct mail solicitation for funds. In fact, mailing lists have a very low rate of return, unless the market is very narrowly and precisely targeted. In addition, the lists go out of date at a rate of about 20% a year, leaving a good list "dead" after five years unless constantly updated. To keep CBN's financially lucrative mailing list up-to-date, every *700 Club* broadcast and now the CBN Internet site incorporate multiple ways for viewers/users to get "free" informational material in exchange for their name, address, and phone number. That data will be put on a mailing list and later used for soliciting funds or mounting political campaigns. In addition, the kind of "factual" information Robertson "sells" on his show either reaches the committed, his partner-subscribers, or it is presented

in a slick, fast-paced, television news style; this would be true of the health videos, presumably made up of footage shot for past Newswatch stories about health. Furthermore, this video series is targeted demographically, designed to appeal to homemakers (Robertson's audience has more women than men) or the elderly, who may turn to religious broadcasting, especially *The 700 Club*, as a form of safe entertainment and also for its experience of community. In terms of Robertson's larger social goals, as a founder of the politically effective Christian Coalition, this media financier has access to the Christian Coalition's mailing list just as that organization has access to CBN's. These lists are highly lucrative for the religious right; in fundraising or political advocacy drives, they can be broken down geographically and crosslisted against other lists, such as registered Republicans, for example, to find potential supporters for or against a particular issues-oriented campaign.

The 700 Club's tie-ins to multiple modes of communication have a synergy which ultimately has a political effect. Phone-ins, for example, often occur after a viewer has watched and identified with the very emotional "let's pray together" sections. A warm and caring voice answers. The caller then receives intense, gratifying, personal reinforcement for his/her 700 Club viewership. Buying a video or getting a free Fact Sheet often puts a viewer's name on the CBN mailing list. Regular viewers may become "partners" but more important, they always get a reward back for their individual contact with CBN, either something sent in the mail or a supportive one-on-one personal conversation and prayer session.

These steps indicate what direct-mail promoters have learned from refining their marketing strategies over the last several decades. I learned the following, for example, when I took a commercial mini-course on direct-mail marketing, and this is advice *The 700 Club* incorporates into every show: Always give your best contacts something material, such as a cassette or a publication, when they respond

to you. It's a prize you offer the small percentage of solicited who answer your pitch. Second, tasks you ask respondents to accomplish have to be presented in very small steps, ones almost effortlessly accomplished. A very powerful persuasion tactic is to ask someone to do something that takes almost no effort at all. It makes the person feel like he/she is doing something of value, and, on the part of the organizer, it assumes that even the lazy can be stimulated to purchase something or to get involved in an organized effort.[Lesage] From these mailing lists, the route to face-to-face organizing, such as getting like-minded people to the polls, is relatively direct.

In "Transformation of Televangelism: Repackaging Family Values," Razelle Frankl describes here how Pat Robertson moved from being a televangelist to a major player in network broadcasting with the success of his Family Channel. However, Robertson has made other moves to expand his media empire which are less visible. In 1993, Robertson considered taking over the press service, UPI, but he decided that it would be too expensive to refurbish. Instead, recognizing and wanting to augment Christian radio's increasing presence and sophistication, Robertson began a daily audio satellite feed out of Washington D.C., Standard News. On Standard News, Robertson puts out two daily audio feeds of a two-minute Christian-oriented newscast, as well as a package of prerecorded commentaries, features, and interviews that local radio programmers can use according to their needs. In this way, the information that CBN tapes each day for its television show's "news" stories serves multiple needs, media formats, and potential listener/viewerships. A story is edited on video for the television program *Newswatch*, transcribed for the World Wide Web, and perhaps re-edited on audio for radio news heard on many Christian radio stations. And the *Newswatch* feature remains available to be recycled in a later "theme" video or video series. The reportage gathered for a story can also appear in print in a CBN magazine article, or

it can be summarized or amplified in a *700 Club* Fact Sheet. The broadcasting arm of CBN gathers material from its in-house staff or its reporters around the world which it recycles into many other media outlets. Now Robertson no longer considers himself a “religious” broadcaster but instead is dedicated to developing the Family Channel as the foremost producer of quality home entertainment. Extraordinarily well distributed on cable, Family Channel now reaches 95% of all U.S. households with cable television and 62% of all U.S. households with television.

Think Tanks and Political Activism

Another kind of conservative media distribution comes from think tanks. Apart from the Institute for Policy Studies, the left does not have think tanks with national influence. Because these policy-planning institutions are dependent on massive corporate funding, most think tanks have a political philosophy which runs from middle-of-the-road liberal to extremely conservative.

Conservative think tanks like the influential Heritage Foundation or the Free Congress Foundation, parent of National Empowerment Television (NET) network, now emphasize as integral to their mission the marketing of ideas. To spread their ideas, the think tanks have innovatively developed modes of distribution across a broad range of media. In her essay here, “Conservative Media Activism,” Anna Williams notes how Edwin Feulner, director of the Heritage Foundation, conceptualizes the foundation’s mission primarily in terms of getting its ideas out:

We don’t just stress credibility, we stress timeliness. We stress an efficient, effective delivery system. Production is one side; marketing is equally important.

Because of its origins and base in a think tank, National Empowerment Television has a top-down organizational and information delivery style, which has a subsequent effect on political organizations which rely on its information, such as the Christian Coalition. However, not just the Free Congress Foundation, which has NET as its own media outlet, but many other think tanks develop multiple modes of outreach.

Think tanks usually maintain contact with a “resource bank of scholars and policy experts around the nation .. to provide the media and Congressional hearings with conservative commentary.” [Peschek, 33] For example, the American Enterprise Institute, which has among its experts Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Robert Bork, Irving Kristol, and Antonin Scalia, puts out its own publications, runs op-ed pieces in the press, and contributes speakers to radio and television shows. Think tanks provide a visible gathering of the intellectual and professional elite and often place people in governmental policy-making positions. They also develop close contacts with the press to try to influence public opinion directly. Ironically, as Chip Berlet points out, although much think tank research is intellectually shallow, it provides a readily available source of pronouncements on national policy which national news reporters regularly use. In Washington, D.C., the Heritage Foundation is known for writing timely short papers which it hand-delivers to Congressional staff people. In addition, the Heritage Foundation built a broadcasting studio in its D.C. office so talk show hosts can come to Washington and address their audiences directly from the nation’s capitol. [Balz, 187]

Paul Weyrich has established two branches of National Empowerment Television, a subscription service for activists and NET proper, a twenty-four hour news and information network. To widen NET’s sphere of influence, each day Weyrich faxes a summary of NET’s previous day’s broadcasts to over 1000 talk show hosts. As Jeff Land notes in “Sitting in Limbaugh” in this book this

connection between talk radio and national politics is extremely important since talk radio provides conservative Republicans and the religious right with a direct tie to millions of daily listeners who are frequently moved by appeals to phone or fax a legislator or the President.

NET also has a close tie to religious right electoral politics and issues activism. It not only has 281 downlink sites for its television programs, but its programs appear every day on CompuServe's Political Issues Forum, where the computer user can type in questions, presumably in real time so as to be received by the program host. Extending the real-time capacities of the Internet, the Kriebel Institute USA broadcasts an interactive political training conference for one day each month on NET and the Internet. The conference uses RealAudio technology to broadcast live audio via the computer site, and those who have registered for the conference can interact with the speakers by phoning an 800 number or sending a fax or email. Such political training ties into and augments the two-day leadership training seminars taken by so many religious conservative activists through the Christian Coalition; on July 29, 1996, for example, the NET political training conference covered the following topics: Opposition Research, How to Topple an Incumbent, How to Run an Absentee Effort, Why Run a Third Party and What Does That Accomplish, and How to Minimize Support for a Third Party.

NET has an unique tie-in to the United States Congress since Congress has its own television production facility where legislators produce shows and television interviews free of charge. In those facilities the Republican National Committee tapes a weekly hour-long show, Rising Tide, which it broadcasts on NET. Newt Gingrich also puts a weekly show on NET. In fact, it is House Republican leader Newt Gingrich who, out of all the Congressional leaders, has best understood the power of the media for the purposes of political action.

Starting his career as an United States Representative in 1978, Gingrich had a

fateful conversation with Richard Nixon in 1982:

House Republicans, [Nixon] said, had never displayed enough teamwork, aggressiveness, or interest in ideas to make them an effective counterforce in a Democratic-controlled body, and he urged Gingrich to start assembling a team of committed activists who could develop an agenda of issues around which the party could rally. [Balz, 118]

With the goal of forging a cohesive political agenda and conservative presence within the Republican Party, Gingrich has actively used a range of mass media to transform his party into one concerned with “ideas.” He began as his own video/audio cassette “publisher” in the late 80s and early 90s within GOPAC, an organization slated to develop future nominees for legislative office both statewide and nationally. At that time it became his personal project to give future and current candidates the ideas, advice, and savvy of an experienced politician, emphasizing the larger picture and where they could fit into it. Gingrich sought to change his party’s culture from one that was oppositional to one that believed it could win. To do this, in the early 1990s he sent unsolicited audio and video tapes each month to potential Republican candidates, especially in those regions where the demographics alone promised a large number of future conservative voters. In those tapes he discussed tactics, strategy, and issues; there were also lectures by or interviews with successful Republicans. [Balz, 145].

Then, in 1994, Gingrich led the political and rhetorical organizing for one of his cleverest strategic moves, the Contract with America, published on Sept. 27 in the U.S. publication with the highest circulation, *TV Guide*. It cost \$250,000; the ad’s front page simply read, “A campaign promise is one thing. A signed contract is quite another.” As three hundred Republicans gathered on the White House lawn for a news conference to announce the event, the right’s intellectual leadership achieved one of its main goals, to control the national press agenda around

legislative issues and to control the political messages discussed in the political arena. As Julia Lesage discusses in her essay on Christian Coalition training tapes, this tactic is known by public relations experts and campaign strategists as “framing the issues,” that is, seizing control of the public-discourse agenda around policy issues. Think tanks on the right were doing this for several decades before the Contract with America, but at that point the right agenda was communicated in terms the voting public could grasp, and the terms of the agenda became widely diffused in the national press.

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Other Christian media empires have a different focus than that of the “D.C. insider,” although they, too, have strong connections to national politics. Doctor James Dobson, whose self-help and family advice videos are distributed primarily through Christian bookstores, has a widely heard daily radio show, Focus on the Family. Dobson’s empire, and the use of his tapes by local churches and in the home is analyzed by Eithne Johnson in this book. I wish to point out some of his other media connections and their tie-in to his main theme—offering domestic advice and youth-oriented materials from a Christian psychologist and educator.

As one drives across the United States, the bored driver is most likely to hear a program like Dr. Dobson’s Focus on the Family while passing through rural areas, especially on AM stations. Local Christian stations, often on AM, rely heavily on pre-packaged programming, and this is why the shows like Dobson’s—and Limbaugh’s—are so widely syndicated. Dobson’s program by far has one of the biggest audiences for a Christian radio show; it is broadcast daily to over 1,450 radio stations nationwide. In her essay in this book, “Postmodern ‘Gimme That Old Time Religion’” Meryem Ersoz locates Dobson’s program within the larger context of radio used for Christian media outreach. Extending that discussion, Jeff Land describes how the community formed by Christian radio listenership coincides with

the listenership of secular talk radio, particularly fans of Rush Limbaugh's daily show

Dobson's show, *Focus on the Family*, elicits an audience response that goes beyond just casual listening; listeners send in 250,000 letters a month, all of which are answered. Dr. Dobson has an extensive publishing empire—ten different monthly magazines go out to groups as diverse as teens, parents, and political activists.³ He seeks to have influence over public policy to the degree that it affects the family. His "Family Issues Alert," a weekly two page fax, reaches 3,600 subscribers. [Diamond, *Wrath*, 71; Scully, E1] Dobson's perspective is always normative about family and gender, and he has played a very powerful role in the anti-gay struggles taking place in the United States. Dobson's facilities produced Colorado's anti-homosexual Amendment 2's radio public service announcement, a campaign analyzed in detail by Laurie Schulze and Frances Guilfoyle here, and the Focus on the Family organization makes radio PSAs for campaigns in other states as well.

Dobson joined forces for a number of years with a Washington, D.C., think tank, Family Research Council, headed by Gary Bauer, formerly a member of the Reagan administration. Now, although the two groups have many joint projects together, the Family Research Council separated so as to become a lobbying group and create a new PAC without impinging on Dobson's tax-exempt educational status. Dobson's subscribers to the Focus on the Family's magazine for activists, *Citizen*, also receive a free Family Research Council monthly newsletter. Both the Focus on the Family organization and the Family Research Council promote an "ideal family" ideology. The Family Research Council, for example, does research on single parent families or births out of wedlock in order to provide legislators with

³Mark Shapiro describes a visit to Dobson's Colorado Springs headquarters in detail. [Shapiro]

evidence to oppose welfare. And, as Chip Berlet notes, Clinton's proposal to lift the ban on gays in the military became the occasion for such groups as the Family Research Council to build on religiously-oriented, anti-gay religious sentiment for their fundraising campaigns. Furthermore, just as Pat Robertson's CBN mailing list helped found the Christian Coalition, according to political analyst Sara Diamond, the Family Research Council organized *Focus on the Family's* radio-listener constituency into a group of state-based think tanks geared toward organizing the grassroots lobbying of state legislators. [Diamond, *Dominion*, 250]

Its Internet Web site does not suggest that the Focus on the Family organization is political. Instead, it promotes video and audio products with a specific appeal to children and youth. In contrast, the Family Research Council's site is one of the most "informational" on the Web, especially among activist sites. It electronically publishes many brief articles, searchable by topic or author. The site also posts a monthly letter from director Gary Bauer and a regular news commentary feature, *Washington Watch*. Unlike the Christian Coalition or even the Family Research Council, Dobson wishes to remove himself from directly endorsing political candidates, and his Internet site emphasizes his low-key presence in terms of drawing national media attention to himself.

Similar to Focus on the Family in its concern for domestic life is Concerned Women of America, but CWA uses a more overtly religious rhetoric. Elsewhere Linda Kintz describes the writings of CWA founder and director, Beverly LaHaye [Kintz], but here it is important to note the ways that media is used by and intersects with CWA's work. The organization has as its structure cohesive Prayer Chapters of fifty women—a leader and seven prayer chain leaders who contact seven other women on a phone chain. These women not only reinforce each other through warm personal contact, they may also be members of the Christian Coalition, with which CWA works closely, and they are often asked to respond to a political issue

with a “fax alert.” A Christian Coalition newsletter describes the work of one such activist woman:

[F]ax machines, computers and on-line information services allow Dannenfelser to do it all out of her home between caring for children and running a household. ‘Technology like the fax, computer and voice mail have allowed me to create a rapidly expanding political action committee while keeping my family my first priority.’ ...With fax machines built into personal computers, a letter to the editor can be sent to every newspaper in the state at the same time.” [Curtis]

On Christian radio CWA, which claimed 600,000 members in 1992, also has a prominent visibility. It has a popular daily half-hour radio program featuring Beverly LaHaye, broadcast on 40 Christian stations nationwide.

Sara Diamond notes the way the CWA radio programs are tied to political activism: “LaHaye’s broadcasts end with action suggestions for listeners—call your Congressman, send money to a crisis pregnancy center, find out if your school library carries one of the objectionable books named on the show.” [Diamond, *Dominion*, 14] The significance of this ability to call listeners into action has already its effectiveness nationally in very significant ways. For example, the Christian Coalition and Concerned Women for America boast that in this way they organized a drive to nominate Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. [Reed, *Politically Incorrect*, pp. 245-46] In a short period of time they mustered their constituency to send 100,000 petitions, letters, and phone calls to Congressmembers. Now they claim success for Thomas’ appointment, a fact completely unobserved by either mainstream or left/feminist media at the time.

Thus the religious right, especially at the elite level of its leadership, makes use of and builds interconnections between media. And various conservative institutions feed messages into mass media outlets. In this context, it should be

noted that the Republicans in Congress deliberately exploit talk radio. As Jeff Land writes about Rush Limbaugh's audience, he notes the close tie between Limbaugh's radio listeners and computer-using Internet fans; this audience of "dittoheads," as Limbaugh fans like to call themselves, creates a community of the like-minded which has both commercial and political clout. The show delivers a predictable market to advertisers and so can command high advertising revenue. It can also agitate listeners about a specific political issue. As Balz notes,

The affinity between host and audience made talk radio a mobilizing tool of great power. It stoked anger, sharpened resentments, personalized policy disputes, and clarified issues in a manner that reduced the middle ground.

[189]

Knowing this, House Republicans have organized to take advantage of talk radio. Taking stock of this popular media format's appeal to conservative listeners, House members' press secretaries put together several hundred names of sympathetic talk radio hosts. Now, through the House Republican Study Committee's program, *Talk Right*, Republican politicians "regularly send the hosts issue briefs listing GOP talking points on current issues and offering a half a dozen House Republican legislators as guests." [Balz, 167]

The most astute critic of the rise of the contemporary religious right is Sara Diamond. In her book *Roads to Dominion*, she defines how she analyzes this movement—in terms of its resources, its networks of individuals and organizations, its relation to the state, and its objectives and ideology. In writing about Christian Coalition leadership training tapes, I also reflect on the movement as such, drawing some comparisons between left and right grassroots activism. Here I wish to draw some additional comparisons between left/feminist uses of the media and those of the religious right. As indicated above, many Christian right media ventures are either well-funded televangelist ministries, raising funds from donations and sales of

products, or they are tied to corporately-funded think tanks. As a result, an elite coordination of message delivery characterizes the religious right's interconnected use of media forms.

In contrast, left and feminist ventures into the media are underfunded and not coordinated at all in terms of their content. Such productions include economically made documentary films and videos, occasionally shown on public television in special series like "Point of View" and often distributed through educational outlets to schools. Introducing a special issue on fundamentalist media, the editors of *Afterimage* characterize this kind of independent film/video mediamaking:

Informed by a combination of social and aesthetic developments (guerrilla television/street video and video as art) media activist on the left has a very different frame of reference....[Its foundational material conditions were] the development of portable technologies and an extensive patchwork system of public and private funding for alternative media from roughly 1965-1980.... [A]s Helen DeMichiel put it in Paper Tiger's *Guide to Media Activism*, 'giddy and smug, passionate and righteous, alternative media activists of the late 60s and 70s dared to predict a future rosy with proliferating visions of a decentralized and creatively intelligent video democracy.' It is this acknowledgment of a free-floating, democratic idealism, coupled with a loose infrastructure of modest fundraising (compared to the religious right's fundraising excess) that characterizes media activism on the left. [Kester and Love, 7]

Radio activism on the left is dominated by National Public Radio, which offers daily newscasts, including "opposite" points of view to give a sense that it is "balanced."

At the elite level of left/feminist publication, independent journals have often become rather expensive quarterly or yearly publications taken over by university

presses. On the level of mass distributed publications, New Left tabloid print media has lost the once-energetic papers which reveled so freely in anarchist aesthetics. In the 60s and 70s, “underground” publications were staff-owned and run, and they only had to make enough money to pay for the next printing. Now left print media remains essay-heavy and can be seen in publications such as *The Nation*, *In These Times*, or *Mother Jones*, some of which are funded by an “angel.” Certain former underground-press writers publish occasional left-oriented analyses in weeklies such as the Chicago or LA *Reader*. These capitalist ventures, including New York’s *Village Voice*, are advertising-heavy and the *Readers* are given out free. The demographics of those publications’ readership is urban professional; that means that many of the *Voice*’s or *Reader*’s readers pride themselves on left-leaning social views. Some independent left and feminist media ventures remain, including *Jump Cut* and *Cineaste* media reviews, Paper Tiger Television’s and Deep Dish TV’s interventions into cable access television. There are still many independent video productions, few of which reach national distribution. And the spirit of this kind of production is still individualistic, often anarchist in its lack of connection to other organizations or social movement.

However, many left and feminist intellectuals have had a great impact on academic disciplines, even if just by asking the question, “What were the women doing all these years?” It is, in fact, the explanatory power of left and feminist analyses that gives them such influence in academic disciplines, especially the social sciences and the humanities. Yet the religious right often sees such influence in terms of a left or feminist or gay conspiracy. Furthermore, fundamentalists have felt themselves to be cultural and political outsiders for most of the century, and it is easy to be jealous of the perceived cultural capital of the left in academia [Bourdieu], although leftists and feminists are hardly coordinated in their intellectual or political endeavors, especially on a national scale.

In the same way, it would be a mistake to interpret religious right media use as either a conspiracy or a network controlled by a few elite figures. Conservative Congress people and intellectuals in Washington, D.C., have had twenty years as a minority voice in the legislature. They have often collaborated on each other's projects and on the boards of conservative political groups or think tanks. There they strategize and constantly discuss how they might enact a conservative public agenda. Working in geographical proximity, remaining constantly aware of each other's political work, and striving to establish a strong conservative political network do not, however, add up to conspiracy. In addition, the Christian right's specific media contribution to this project has other roots, those of evangelical Protestantism.

Evangelism

As John C. Green discusses this origin, referring to evangelicals' strength in the 1994 elections, he emphasizes that these believers are dispersed among organizations that have little denominational hierarchy or unity:

...[T]his tradition combines orthodox Christian beliefs with intense individualism, resulting in a highly decentralized set of organizations, including thousands of small denominations, parachurch groups, and independent churches. Even the largest bodies, such as the giant Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Protestant denomination in the country), are actually voluntary alliances of their component institutions. This environment puts a premium on aggressive, entrepreneurial leaders who can successfully compete for money, followers, and publicity with the world—and with each other. Such leaders become adept at recognizing discontent among

religious people, identifying resources to respond to such discontent, and organizing the resources to bring the two together. They also become familiar with the latest communications, fundraising, and organizing techniques. ... Thus, the evangelical subculture is closer to the rough and tumble of American electoral politics than many other religious traditions. [Rozelle and Wilcox, 3-4]

Evangelicals have long participated in or collaborated with parachurch organizations, ranging from revivals to overseas missions to independent bible colleges and religiously oriented universities. Entrepreneurial pastors have built up megachurches, especially in the suburbs, often with 5,000 to 10,000 members that have services as slick as *The 700 Club*, and which include music, both gospel and Christian rock, videos, and a fast pace. Such entrepreneurship writ large has led to the financial success of what Eithne Johnson describes as evangelical megacommunicators. The megacommunicators draw on the evangelical community's long-time concern to do outreach, to save the sinner. With their own particular vision and organizational skill, these entrepreneurs develop an interconnected empire of organizations, often encompassing a big-budget media operation with its own broadcasting studios, a convention and conference center that may conduct Sunday services and revivals, a series of publications, and perhaps a connected university or missionary organization. The megacommunicators have a lot of political power, and they facilitate how the conservative political movement can mobilize many people rapidly.

There's a synergy of ideological agreement, effective use of the mass media and of "narrowcasting" (media targeted to a specific audience), and political organizing. This synergy characterizes the relation between political and intellectual elites, the "megacommunicators," and local, religious-right political activism, often conducted through churches. A 1979 Gallup Poll, conducted in conjunction with *Christianity*

Today, found that 82% of evangelicals go to church once a week, and about a third go twice or more a week. As Ralph Reed, director of the Christian Coalition, said about this group of people as a constituency, “The advantage we have is that liberals and feminists don’t generally go to church. They don’t gather in one place three days before the election.” [Balz, 312]

In 1987 and 88, U.S. teleministries were rocked by scandal, but the attention the press paid to Jimmy Swaggert and the Bakkers deflected public awareness from the right’s steady electoral organizing, the growth of conservative think tanks, and the religious right’s active participation in aiding right wing movements in Central America, where it worked with the explicit support, indeed gratitude, of the U.S. government. [Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare*] In her essay in this book, Razelle Frankl traces how the teleministries recouped their former ground, and in fact, increased in adaptability and sophistication. She also has analyzed how televangelists’ entrepreneurship has its roots in the culture of evangelism and in the permanent presence of revivals in U.S. culture

In *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion*, Razelle Frankl traces the roots of contemporary religious media enterprises in the experience gained in the promotion and management of revivals, beginning with the fascinating entrepreneur Charles Grandison Finney [d. 1875]. Finney understood that a revival has to be a planned event to stimulate religious fervor, something managed rationally, using psychological and organizational “tricks.” Some of these organizational tricks include having people meet for days of concentrated meetings, where they are pushed to an emotional extreme, or having the entire congregation pray for the conversion of specific sinners. In his published Lectures, Finney said:

It is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is the purely philosophical result of the right use of sophisticated means. [Finney, 13]

Revivalist preachers were independent businessmen. They did not have to be

ordained, just heed the call of the Spirit and go out and preach. They, like most other petit bourgeois capitalists, had to learn by trial and error, and individually developed their own “tricks” to capture audiences. Thus, by the 1930s Billy Sunday made the revival format even more thrilling with his own brand of entertainment and a call to American patriotism, and the 1950s saw Billy Graham filling up stadiums like Madison Square Garden and building a national radio audience. As Frankl writes about them,

What worked well was used, what did not was dropped—this was the rationale for new practices, in direct rejection of traditional pastoral or ministerial practices. One aspect of this professional autonomy was the necessity for revivalists to build their own organizational and financial resources, which they did with a clientele of their own. [60]

As revivals and fundamentalist churches moved to urban areas, the preachers saw radio as an effective tool to publicize meetings and directly to incite religious fervor. The Federal Communications Commission mandated in 1929 that stations provide free air time for religious broadcasting, but that time went to mainstream denominations. From the very beginning, Christian broadcasters assumed that radio was a desirable medium with which to present their message and that they would have to pay for that air time. Furthermore, they were usually excluded from the major radio networks, so they worked through independent stations. At the same time, although the major denominations received free air time, they would not spend the money necessary for an expensive broadcast ministry. Finally, by 1960, two developments greatly enhanced evangelicals’ broadcasting possibilities: The FCC allowed paid air time to meet the networks’ public-interest obligations, and networks granted affiliates more autonomy to sell local air time. As Sara Diamond writes,

Local network affiliate stations were encouraged to accumulate profits by

selling 'religious' air time to the highest bidder, not to broadcasters most representative of the local religious community. An up-and-coming band of televangelists was now free to devote any amount of program time to fundraising. Over time, the staid mainline religious broadcasters were unable to compete with the more flamboyant NRB [National Religious Broadcasters'] producers. The opportunity to begin to monopolize religious television and radio tied evangelicals' media success to the production of captivating programming, an example of which was the political talk-show format pioneered by Pat Robertson's CBN, beginning in the early 1960s. [*Dominion*, 98]

Returning to The 700 Club—Television's Emotional Appeal

Returning to look closely at *The 700 Club* program of April 26, 1996, it is possible to analyze the ways in which *The 700 Club*'s format allows for discussion of current, i.e., unpredictable, events and also maintains a gratifyingly predictable relation to its audience. Because the show largely takes the format of discussing the news, broadly interpreted, it appeals to viewers' sense of understanding relevant world events; but it also has a deep emotional appeal. To be more precise, it has a deep affective appeal. Lawrence Grossberg, author of the insightful *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, points out that affect is not only the arena where people can be emotionally manipulated, it is also the arena of emotional investment, commitment, passion, volition, and will. For example, the turning to Jesus which evangelists promote is seen by those within the fundamentalist religious community as an empowering event, allowing one to throw off addictions, emotional phobias and anxieties, and behavior that hurts others. If one looks closely at the structure of one *700 Club* program, it becomes

clear how this very sophisticated show hails both rationality and affect on the part of its viewers. As Grossberg defines the social operation of affect,

Affect identifies the strength of the investment which anchors people in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings and pleasures, but it also determines how invigorated people feel at any moment of their lives, their level of energy or passion.[82]

The April 26 program begins with Newswatch, which takes up the first half hour, followed by *The 700 Club* proper. (In this half-hour *Newswatch* section, the commentators were host Ben Kinchlow, regular Terry Meeuwsen, and staff member Lee Webb standing in for Pat Robertson; later in *The 700 Club* proper, just Ben and Terry shared the stage since Pat was gone for the day.) *Newswatch* contains here two long, current-events sections from recently breaking news. The first deals with the U.S.-brokered cease fire in Lebanon. The Israeli Labor Party has agreed to the formation of a Palestinian state since the PLO announced it no longer demanded the annihilation of Israel. Pat Robertson has long been a supporter of Israel, and this segment seems as “objective” as most television news, followed with little comment by the three hosts, except that Ben emphasizes that a nation has to protect its own survival and he hopes Israel will not sign away its rights, implicitly warning viewers about possible future treachery from Palestine.

The next story uses far more slanted language and contains as visual footage only images of Asian governmental leaders signing papers; it is about an accord between China and Russia. The commentary warns that analysts see this accord as a clear warning to the United States: China and Russia claim that the treaty lays a foundation for a new world order and thus provides a way to keep the United States from shaping world policy single handedly. The commentary also says that for China the treaty promotes more of an anti-American sentiment than a pro-Russian one, since China is trying to counter U.S. influence in the Pacific. “New world

order” is the story’s buzzword. The term elicits the fear about “collectivism” that communism has always had for the right, a fear that the right has also profited from for years. The story implies that the treaty threatens U.S. sovereignty or U.S. international presence, but the relation of a loss of U.S. sovereignty to a massive increase in the power and scope of multinational corporations is never discussed. (In “After Containment: Enlargement or Rollback?” Noam Chomsky explores the realities of a world economic order dominated by multinational corporations—the realities behind but suppressed by conservative politics).

The second major current-events news story carried by *Newswatch* covers the Democrats’ demand to raise the minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.15 an hour. The story itself acknowledges that this is a popular proposal, indicating that Dole says he may accede to it. In this way, the story proper seems relatively unbiased, presenting both pros and cons to the legislation. However, the CBN version of the demand for a raise in the minimum wage leaves out what all the other networks later spent the weekend discussing—that the Democrats’ demand is an election-year ploy to embarrass the Republicans, especially Presidential candidate Bob Dole. Such a reduction of context is frequent in all newscasts, but this reductionism is even more characteristic of CBN. With this in mind, we can reinterpret the *Newswatch* story about China and Japan, noticing that the treaty is interpreted and commented on and an attitude proposed which viewers are invited to take up, but the story itself is drastically stripped of any contextualization.

Earlier, *Newswatch*’s opening credits introduced this upcoming story on the minimum wage with images of U.S. currency being run through the printing presses. Such an image bears the connotation of “false money,” a connotation historically cherished by the right ever since the days of William Jennings Bryan. At the very end of the story, we see reporter Melissa Charbonneau in Washington, saying that Republicans insist that if they do give in to the bill, it won’t be without

negotiating for some key riders—those may include a training wage for entry level workers, a \$500 tax credit per child, or another kind of tax reduction, such as cutting the capital gains tax. The last point, tax credit for the wealthiest sectors of the country, something corporate and upper middle class U.S. has long fought for, is presented very quickly and then elided, not referred to at all in the subsequent talk-show-format discussion. In the discussion that follows, Ben makes the strongest and most interesting point, shifting the term “people” to refer to small business owners. He says Democrats always claim they want to help “the people, but the people who will catch it in the end are those who have to ante up the minimum wage.” These “people” (that is, businessmen) will only be able to do that by raising prices or laying off workers.

The *Newswatch* program then presents two feature stories which were obviously prepared in advance, one commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, and another on UFOs and people’s reported experience of being abducted by aliens. This latter segment both refers to and uses footage from very popular media narratives, the Fox TV show of *The X Files*, an upcoming action-adventure sci-fi film *Independence Day*, and *Strange Encounters of the Third Kind*. The segment imports the appeal of these shows by using footage from them, and it also gives live testimony from three people who said they had been abducted—a white farmer standing in a woods by a river and two women filmed against a threatening black background. There is also sync sound footage of Louis Farrakhan lecturing to a crowd, describing his personally having been transported by aliens to a flying saucer and saying that the saucers will soon be seen all over America’s major cities.

One of the women interviewed looks disreputable because she has disheveled hair and is dressed in red, which has the connotation of “loose” and which also characteristically “bleeds” in the television image. She is overweight and badly made up and at one point is seen in a store that sells UFO paraphernalia, where her

presence seems to indicate “poor judgment” or “weak mind.” Two statistics are narrated verbally and placed graphically on the screen: Half of all Americans believe in UFOs, and one in seven claims to have had a UFO or paranormal experience. Two British farmers who perpetrated a hoax in which strange circles mysteriously appeared in a series of fields over a number of years show how they made the patterns in the grass. They treat the deception with wry rural humor.

A UFO expert, a UFO debunker, and a theologian are interviewed. The theologian is John Weldon, author of *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (book jacket shown in close up as a promo and verification of his authenticity). The UFO expert looks a little strange, with an unusual beard, thick glasses and a lined face; he is filmed in an unflattering, excruciatingly tight close up. The UFO debunker, in contrast, is filmed in medium shot at his computer, surrounded by books, and in a more flattering light.

The theologian and the CBN reporter point out that the experience of abduction probably represents a manifestation of Satan, in which people have hypnotic-like experiences and are manipulated by entities so they cannot distinguish fantasy from reality. The more normal-looking woman says that the aliens who took her to a spaceship, did a gynecological procedure on her, and removed her fetus. (The mysterious disappearance of a fetus, due to the devil, also seems an interesting possible cover-up for or symbolic reference to a miscarriage or abortion.) The disheveled woman tells the camera that because of her experience, she lost her taste for organized religion and found something deeper inside her.

To conclude the story, the reporter walks in the field where the farmer had been interviewed earlier and he says while walking, “That may be why many Christian theologians say that the UFO phenomenon is demonic, and they say that whatever UFOs are, they are best to be avoided.” In this feature, *The 700 Club* cleverly introduces and does not quite condemn popular culture products. It uses UFO

imagery to add to this show's media appeal. Indeed, the reporter says to avoid UFOs, not avoid films and television shows about the phenomenon. However, the segment clearly implies that even depictions of UFOs do not provide Christians with good family television or movie fare.

This feature could have been taped weeks earlier. Today, it provides the tie-in to one of the program's regular features, the dramatic reenactment of a real-life, reformed sinner's story. To introduce this segment, Terry and Ben are sitting in a set in the ballroom of the Founders' Inn. They are presenting this segment from CBN's Virginia Beach convention center and they have an audience of several hundred people. Ben tries jokingly to hypnotize Terry, but she resists, saying she doesn't like that kind of thing, that it has always made her edgy. Ben asks if anyone in the audience has been hypnotized. Most seem to know that it is an experience outside the acceptable range of "Christian" discourse. "There's a hand," Ben says, and a long shot shows one arm quickly dropping down from one lone audience member on the far side of the hall. The dramatic reenactment then unfolds the life and conversion of Phil Potter, stage hypnotist, who, as the narrator says, learned how he had been lead down a subtle road into the occult. The segment contains within it depictions of a small farm boy's fascination with the idea of hypnosis, even though his brothers and sisters laugh at him; what looks like 8mm movie footage of Potter's stage show, here hypnotizing a group of high school students; and shots of a hammer smashing the "tools" he had used. In the follow-up discussion, Ben quotes Deuteronomy, Chapter 18, against imitating detestable things others are doing, such as divination or casting spells.

Finally, the show's fast-paced, rapidly-edited video logo, has a series of images that sum up the show's demographics and perhaps its audience's idealized image of itself: Pat Robertson is shown with his wife and thoroughbreds on his Virginia Beach estate; Ben Kinchlow is shown in casual clothes in a small-town, "cracker,"

dry goods store with the elderly white couple who run it. Ben is also seen in shirtsleeves outside a rural black church, where parishioners are serving a pot-luck picnic. In both shots he's very warmly welcomed, almost like he's going to a homecoming to the rural South. Terry Meeuwsen is shown with children in an aquarium and in a classroom. Then Pat appears again, this time shot in close up with soldiers at the Vietnam Memorial; a hand traces the names engraved on the black marble wall; and Pat hugs a vet who is smiling and holding back tears. This image at the Memorial is important because it is necessary to refurbish regularly the image of Pat's military career. It is as clouded as Bill Clinton's since Pat's father, a U.S. Senator, reputedly had his son transferred from a troop ship bound for combat to supply duty during the Korean War. [Boston, 41]

The video logo closes with shots of the newsroom in action and shots of *The 700 Club* playing on a television set in a working class living room. Lyrics of the upbeat song that run over this spot include lines such as, "We believe that love endures forever and the joy can be expressed in how we live" (seen over Pat's rich life style), "...children bring us all together, and friendship is the best thing we can give," "someone you can talk to who will help you see it through" (at the Vietnam memorial), and "friends you can turn to" (over the staff room preparing the show).

The 700 Club self-consciously fulfills a number of functions. It serves as a televisual community for its regular viewers. It both entertains and, in the sense that Grossberg refers to above, invigorates viewers. It also sets the parameters of discourse for this viewership, both cognitively and emotionally. It signals viewers how to (or when not to) invest themselves in certain "experiences, practices, identities, meanings, and pleasures." For this virtual community, *The 700 Club* offers the pleasures of *gemeinschaft*, a shared set of assumptions, and a smaller and more manageable subculture that gives the comfort of security in a rapidly

changing age.⁴ It lets the audience have the experience of modern media and respond to the show's invitation to learn about the modern world, the secular world, within a Christian framework. And within its shared framework of patriotism and Americanism, *The 700 Club* lets its viewers explore and constantly modify what "permissible identities" might be for Christian Americans. Unlike the reductionist rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh, who also builds his own kind of virtual conservative community, this show expresses popular conflicts and contradictions within its ultimate framework of "interpretation."

Bobby Alexander has analyzed this show's unique contribution to televangelism as allowing, indeed inviting, viewers imaginatively to try out new, upwardly mobile, class-based styles in dress, language, and attitude that would allow them to raise their aspirations in class terms. For the middle class, a viewer can identify with the image of Pat as a rich man, "expressing joy in how he lives"; the show regularly offers interviews with other rich men—usually men—who offer an image of the capitalist ideal of successful Christian business people. In particular, Ben Kinchlow daily offers a visual variation on the perfect picture of a rich black man. His white hair is impeccably coifed (perhaps partially straightened), and each day he appears in a new outfit, including a different suit, shirt, tie, and handkerchief. His role as fashion plate gives viewers an extraordinary visual vocabulary to teach them what it means to be a fashionably dressed man, or what it might mean ideally to be a visual exemplar of a black man. Pat's style is more conservative, that of the old rich. And although Terry was a former Miss America, she demonstrates through her tasteful daily wardrobe changes what a lady dressed in colorful but conservatively tailored clothes should wear. She accessorizes with beautiful scarves

⁴Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock*, is friend to Newt Gingrich and one of the gurus of the religious right.

and fashionable, simple jewelry. She never wears the figure-hugging clothes that other women talk-show hosts do, but she usually has on long suit jackets or overblouses and modest-length skirts that de-emphasize her figure while flowing gracefully as she walks.

The news shows provide a sense of being up-to-date and teach a current-events or contemporary-culture vocabulary. Furthermore, in advance of most television viewers, this community is encouraged to get involved with extremely current media developments, particularly computer use and the Internet. The show offers a Christian reason to overcome technophobia. *The 700 Club* has become the vehicle par excellence for letting evangelicals enter the modern world while avoiding the feared pitfalls of “modernism.”

Bobby Alexander also draws on the ideas of anthropologist Victor Turner that people need rituals to build and constantly to reaffirm community, which they do by “performing” it. Television lets viewers constantly perform one of the key rituals of capitalism, one that reinforces Americans’ most prized shared value, that is, the ritual of consumption. Turner says that performing a ritual gives people a way of relating to the world and to others, even though it seems temporarily to suspend participants from the everyday. The key ritual aspect of *The 700 Club* is its emphasis on televisual community prayer and subsequent charismatic healing. Each program has a central segment where the hosts read letters from viewers, both from those who had been healed or spiritually called to Jesus through the show, and from those who need healing. Ben and Terry describe various physical manifestations of illness, and Ben says, “We command this to heal now, in Jesus’ name.” Viewers and people in the audience hold hands and pray along. The whole institution of the show asserts the possibility of collapsing distance in this way and saving souls and bodies over the airwaves. Ben also requests that the saved and healed call and talk to a counselor, to share the good news, in a toll-free call. In fact, what the letters to

The 700 Club indicate, and what televangelists have presumed all along, is that the casual viewer might just experiment and try out praying along. Whether it is the placebo effect or not, enough viewers get relief from illness, pain, and mental distress, so as to write back, call in, and perhaps join a church. This is the motor that has driven both revivals and televangelism for years.

When they consider the political effect of televangelism and talk shows, liberal critics often focus on the obvious—how narrowly the hosts interpret current events. However, what is equally significant is that millions of listeners “authorize” a Ben Kinchlow or a Rush Limbaugh to speak for them, granting the television figures the authority of the healer, in the case of *The 700 Club*, or the authority of the mercurial iconoclast who articulates a sense of dumbfounded outrage, in the case of Rush Limbaugh. It is easy to critique these programs in terms of how they emotionally manipulate audiences and reduce discussions of social issues to the least common denominator, but it would be a mistake not to understand the power these broadcasters have to reach large numbers of people and weave around those viewers the sense of community, of ties to others who share a moral, social and often religious world view. Many differences among viewers are suppressed for the time that this sense of community prevails, but it is important that we understand this mechanism of how the religious right constructs a sense of community if we are to understand how it is that someone who has lost their job due to corporate downsizing, or someone who has a gay relative or is gay, or someone who has had an abortion or helped a friend or relative get one, can look away from that part of their life so as to affirm the pleasure of being inside a tightly knit, moral, empowering, and secure world.

Right-Wing Advocacy Media’s Rhetoric:

Within its overarching project of reconstructing daily life, conservative discourse provides many consolations. It relies on familiar, ideologically-coded expressions, phrased in terms that have a lasting symbolic value in the United States. In particular, conservative perspectives on social issues constantly shift the discussion to the plane of the “small world”—that of individual moral will and the family. Conservative appeals to individualism and idealized gender and family roles draw upon hegemonic structures of feeling to evoke a sense of ideological inclusion (us vs. them) and thus community. This ideological project of simplification and absolutism, where only a narrow range of social positions is addressed, is described at length by various authors in this book. From a theoretical perspective, Linda Kintz analyzes the mechanisms and political implications of the religious right’s drive for clarity, which results from its unquestioningly embracing natural law and the free market. Other authors—Steven Gardiner, Chip Berlet, Ioannis Mookas, Laurie Schulze and Frances Guilfoyle—discuss these rhetorical strategies of moralizing and reductionism concretely in terms of initiative campaigns, notably in Oregon and Colorado, to limit homosexual rights.

In his critique of the right-wing film *Gay Rights, Special Rights*, Ioannis Mookas refers to social developments in the U.S. in the 70s and 80s traced by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States*. Omi and Winant find that a key element of the right’s attack on affirmative action and racial equality lies in a successful rhetorical strategy which calculatedly shifts the U.S. discourse on race from the standard of *group rights*, judged by “equality of results,” back to the far older standard of an *individual’s right* to equality of opportunity. To see rights as only adhering to the individual, not to a disadvantaged group, also implies that only the meritorious deserve rights and that these are individuals from morally sanctioned populations who demonstrate the will to raise themselves out of poverty or other adverse circumstances. Indeed, this concept of raising oneself by the

bootstraps neatly incorporates both the ideology of individualism and that of free market competition. Omi and Winant trace the historical basis of this regression in the public discourse around civil rights to the transformations and dislocations of the 70s and 80s:

Commonly held concepts of nation, community, and family were transformed, and no new principle of cohesion, no new cultural center, emerged to replace them. New collective identities, rooted in the ‘new social movements,’ remained fragmented and politically disunited. In short, the U.S. was politically fragmented as differences of all sorts—regional, racial, sexual, religious—became more visible while economic stability and global military supremacy seemed to vanish. A plethora of interest groups, it seemed, had suddenly emerged, invoking a bewildering array of new social and political values, creating unprecedented political disorientation, and leaving the ‘mainstream’ with no clear notion of the ‘common good.’” (121-122)

Furthermore, Omi and Winant point out that a mostly middle class, mostly white flight to the suburbs created a population willing to tax itself for direct social services but unwilling to pay for social welfare programs.⁵ The “plethora of interest groups” referred to above are now often viewed in conservative discourse as “special interests” catered to at the expense of hard working whites, whose resentment has been stoked against group rights.

The political theme of “No Special Rights” so effectively used in the Oregon and Colorado anti-gay initiative efforts was developed, according to Chip Berlet, after more than a decade of the organized right’s “field testing” various media campaigns aimed at turning homophobia into a political weapon. Berlet locates the

⁵See Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction*. [Edsall]

origins of this strategy in Paul Weyrich's 1981 request to his Free Congress Foundation staff member Father Enrique Rueda to research the homosexual movement in the United States. In his resulting book, *The Homosexual Network*, Rueda expresses alarm at how much this "network" has "infiltrated" many major U.S. institutions. Such a conspiracy theory has much in common with older anti-semitic fears of rich Jewish bankers' secretly controlling international finance; currently in right discourse around homosexual privilege, it is combined with statistics demonstrating that homosexuals are more affluent and have more disposable income than the rest of the population. Ironically, such statistics were first developed by the national gay press about their subscriber base in order to attract advertising revenue, and these claims, both from the homosexual press and from the right, continue to erase the existence of poor and working class gays and lesbians. [Kahn, 27]

In Colorado's Amendment 2 initiative campaign, analyzed by Laurie Schulze and Frances Guilfoyle, right-wing television ads featured black speakers referring with pride to "their" civil right movement and denouncing the extension of their legal victory to homosexuals as a group—since homosexuals can freely chose their lifestyle. Similarly, the film *Gay Rights, Special Rights* draws an extended comparison between racial discrimination and discrimination against homosexuals. In the film, Lou Sheldon states, "They [homosexuals] want to be elevated ... to a true minority status that would give them special rights." As Mookas points out,

A term without any legal definition, 'minority status' is actually a clever mutation of 'protected classes,' the legal term for discrete groups historically prevented from sharing fully and equally in civic realms such as employment, housing, and public accommodations because of bias, discrimination, or prejudice. Since we are still accustomed to thinking of minorities as primarily racial, 'minority status' is employed to inflame the

deeply rooted anxieties in white subjectivity over economic displacement. Thus, the term “special” used in anti-homosexual campaigns has resonance with the concepts of “privileged” and “exceptional” and “tiny fraction” that conspiracy theories like Rueda’s explicitly propose.

I draw this extended example not only to demonstrate how effectively the right can separate two constituencies who need to unite to defend the legal concept of “group rights”—homosexuals and people of color, but also to indicate how the degree to which right discourse has shaped public discourse in the United States. That the public, legal struggle over gay rights has been definitively shaped by right-wing rhetoric can be confirmed by looking at the Supreme Court decision declaring Colorado’s Amendment 2 unconstitutional.

The majority opinion, written by Justice Kennedy, confirms the applicability of a concept of “group rights” to homosexuals seeking political redress for discrimination; it also testifies to the *malice* expressed toward homosexuals in the initiative campaign against them. As Justice Kennedy writes:

We find nothing special in the protections Amendment 2 withholds. These are protections taken for granted by most people either because they already have them or do not need them; these are protections against exclusion from an almost limitless number of transactions and endeavors that constitute ordinary civic life in a free society. ...[L]aws of the kind now before us raise the inevitable inference that the disadvantage imposed is born of animosity toward the class of persons affected... [Kennedy]

Significantly, in his angry dissent, Justice Scalia's vocabulary echoes the rhetoric about homosexuals propagated on the right. Scalia specifically denounces the "efforts of a politically powerful minority" to revise the traditional sexual mores that "seemingly tolerant Coloradans" are making a "modest attempt" to preserve. In particular, he echoes the conspiracy theories about homosexuality so carefully nourished by both mainstream religious conservatives and the far right:

The problem (a problem, that is, for those who wish to retain social disapprobation of homosexuality) is that, because those who engage in homosexual conduct tend to reside in disproportionate numbers in certain communities,...have high disposable income, and of course care about homosexual-rights issues much more ardently than the public at large, they possess political power much greater than their numbers, both locally and statewide. Quite understandably, they devote this political power to achieving not merely a grudging asocial toleration, but full social acceptance, of homosexuality....

....The Court has no business imposing on all Americans the resolution favored by the elite classes from which the members of this institution are selected, pronouncing that 'animosity' toward homosexuality..is 'evil.'
[Scalia]

The discourse propagated as common sense through a network of conservative

institutions is now explicitly part of the rhetoric of the Supreme Court. And it is in both the legal sphere and the sphere of popular political activism that the struggle will continue to define the meaning of the term “rights.”⁶

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⁶A number of civil-rights groups are represented by our authors. Chip Berlet is a senior analyst for Political Research Associates, 120 Beacon Street, No. 202, Cambridge MA 02139; (617) 661-9313 . [Nicholson, 23] Steven Gardiner is a researcher for the Coalition for Human Dignity, P.O. Box 40344, Portland, Oregon, 97240; (503) 281-523. I have also drawn extensively upon the Interfaith Alliance's large (605K) document, “How to Win.” [Radical Right Task Force]

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Notes: